

Debates on Dalit literature writing

Dr. Rajendra Rohit¹ Assistant Professor (Gujarati Literature), Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Government College, Silvassa
Dr. Pawan Agrawal², Assistant Librarian, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Government College, Silvassa

Abstract

This paper discussed various well talked issues and debates over Dalit literature writings. The authors revisit several theories established by different scholars and tried to restudy and analyze the same. The authors attempt to set a new discourse as it is unjustified to separate a literature from other literature on the basis of caste of writer. The post modern era, in which we living, is known for removing the barriers based on caste, creed, gender etc. At the same time when a literature is narrowed down in its scope just because it is written by a definite group of people, will fail the beauty of post modern era and of the literature being written. This paper strives to remove all those differences to set a new perspective in Dalit writings.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Aesthetic of Literature, Dalit Writers, Caste system

INTRODUCTION

The importance of literature in society is very well known and understood. Literature is considered and acknowledged as a mirror of society. However, the work of the mirror is to reflect what is true in the real sense so that people can correct the mistakes reflected in the mirror. At the same time, literature plays a role more than the mirror. Literary writings not only reflect the ills of society but also make the people realize the people about it and motivate them to not repeat the same mistakes. With this objective only, the writer through various forms of literary writings, such as poetry, fiction, stories, humour etc., expresses his thoughts, feeling and his ideas of improvement in the society.

The concern of this paper is one of such forms, i.e. Dalit literature, which is written on the conditions of Dalits or oppressed people of the society. However, for the last few years, this literature is seized to discuss the issues of every oppressed person as the meaning of the term represents but remained caste-based literature. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had issued an advisory for media to not use the term 'Dalit' for the people belonging to scheduled castes (Firstpost). In the same article, Gangadhar Pantawane added that "what is Dalit? To me, Dalit is not caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in

humanism." Ratilal Rohit in the Introduction of his book, 'Ambedkarvadi sahitya', preferred the term 'Ambedkarvadi literature' instead of the term 'Dalit literature' (R. Rohit). However, the objective of this paper is not to discuss the chronology of the term 'Dalit'. The term here is considered as a broader term rather than identifying a particular caste.

Dalit literature was written to reinforce consciousness and awareness about the rights of the people who were marginalized in society. This concept helped and worked around the development of a new community. Now the questions are arising over Dalit writing.

The society and world are ever-changing and the same is applicable for the literature; at the same time, it is required too. Karl Marx, Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Shahuji Maharaj and many other thinkers worked around the reformation of the oppressed and marginalized people. Rajendra Rohit refers The Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad as a social reformer (R. Rohit 106). Marx and other Western thinkers put their thought into society and they were well adopted by many people. In India, Shahuji Maharaj, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, and Babasaheb Ambedkar had been working for the exploited and oppressed people. However, Babasaheb Ambedkar is considered at top of all of these due to his mammoth contributions. All of them have faced the issues of oppression and insult somewhere in their life. Ambedkar faces these experiences in his own country while Mahatma Gandhi faced the same in South Africa. The difference between both is that one of them faced it due to his caste and other faced it due his colour. Although this situation is changed a lot today, in a real sense it still exists in various parts of the country. Mahatma Jotiba Phule is known for his social movements for the reformation of the oppressed and exploited people. His writings are very important and considered as the pillar for the development of Dalit literature. His book 'Gulamgiri' is a milestone in this debate.

The literature which was based on huge social contribution and the work of social reformation is now reduced to the literature of empathy which is not sufficient (Wessler). Yashwant Vaghela a prominent Gujarati writer has noted that 'this literature (Dalit literature) is the literature of feeling; feeling describes the ill of casteism, but cannot solve it' (Waghela). Most of the writings written for Dalits, people of marginalized society or women are

pessimistic. However, some literary pieces motivate the reader to come out from the situation of oppression and exploitation, but the number of such literature is negligible. However, being in limited number these writers showed and motivated the people to overcome such situations and get a respective place in society. As a person, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar is an ultimate example who overcome all oppressive situations and made his place in history. He considered education as a very important tool to avoid and fight with exploiting agents in society. He motivated the community 'to be educated, get unite and struggle for the betterment of society'. In some handful of optimistic Dalit writings, poetry plays an important role in inspiring people to overcome social exploitation. Poetry of B. Kashinand '*Kay gotos hey majhya mitra*', writings of Jayprakash Kardam are such examples.

Writings in Dalit literature has completed more than five decades. However, it is visible in different literary pieces from time to time. Hira Dome's poetry "Achhut ki shikayat" published in September, 1914 in Saraswati magazine is considered first poetry on Dalit conscience in Hindi literature. In the 21st century, there is a need of literature that inspires the youth and the community towards higher education as education is the only tool that gives one the power and capability to survive in an exploitative society. Education is the only tool that can eliminate caste, creed, religion, colour, language-based discriminations from society. Writers of today need to stay with the affected community and work actively on the line of Jotiba Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar in addition to their writings. But still, it could not become a reality. Yashwant Vaghela, therefore, says that that the Dalit literature of the third decade failed to develop any social movement to combat social discrimination.

The literature, which can portrait the life of a person who is passing from a pitiful, merciful and painful situation, is indeed impressive and remarkable, however, the literature which is full of positivity and optimism, is more important and effective for the Dalit consciousness.

Another debate that is going on is about the nature of Dalit literature. In this debate, two questions are prominent first what is Dalit literature and second who can write Dalit literature? In respect of the first one, the definition of the term Dalit needs to be considered. A lot of discussion taken placed on it. Initially, the term Dalit was used for the people of Scheduled Caste but the notion kept changing and now the term has become more inclusive. Baburao Bagul in the presidential note during Dalit literary conference in Mahad (1979) said that "The word "Dalit" does not refer only to Buddhists and backward class people, but also to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed." Omprakash Valmiki, in his seminar paper 'Dalit

Literature in the Eyes of Dalits', said "the meaning of the term has a more inclusive meaning'. Arjun Dangle (Dangle 264) also observes that

"When Dalit literature began to be talked about, several doubts were raised as to its nature ... Initially the discussion centred around Buddhist (or Mahar) youths as they led the movement. Later on, it realized that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers and intellectuals clearly stated that it was not the literature of a particular caste. Their stand from the beginning is broad and well-developed."

Truly, the term Dalit represents a person regardless of his/her caste, creed, gender, religion etc. We can understand it through an example; in a collector office if the peon is subjected to exploitation regardless of his/her caste may fall into the definition of the term 'Dalit' while the person holding the chair of the powerful post who is harassing and exploiting the peon would be the exploiter regardless of his/her caste etc. A similar example was given by Savyasaachi saying a prostitute is as much a Dalit as is the spouse of an upper-caste patriarch who is ill-treated, as are the victims of ethnocide and communalism irrespective of whether they are Hindus, Christians, Muslims or Sikhs (Savyasaachi 1659). Imtiaz Ahmed in his article 'Can there be a Category Called Dalit Muslims?' also denied the claim that the term Dalit comes from a particular religion or caste and noted "Islam's orientation is remarkably hierarchical...in a wide variety of fields. First, the relation of the believers with non-believers is conceived in strictly hierarchical terms with the believer, the dhimmi and the kafir constituting a clear hierarchy. Second, the relation of Allah to the believer is conceived in hierarchical terms. It is a relation of subordination and subservience... The relation of the husband to her wife is clearly conceived in hierarchical terms even if the text does not distinguish between them in terms of religious duties enjoined upon them..." (Ahmad). Therefore it is suitable to include everyone who faced any kind of oppression, harassment or exploitation as maximum scholars agreed upon.

In another question of this row, some scholars believe that the literature which is written about the Dalit is Dalit literature while other groups of scholars believe that the literature written by Dalit writers on Dalit life may be called Dalit literature. Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay says that Dalit literature is not a literary movement in the ordinary sense of the term. It is, like Black literature, a product of identity as well as constitutive of that identity (Savyasaachi). By saying this, he intends to point out that the literature which is written on Dalit is not Dalit literature but the literature written by Dalit writers is Dalit literature. Sharatchandra Muktibodh said, "Dalit literature is enemy of untouchability and slavery because the reflection of Dalits is

Dalit literature. The literature written with Dalit consciousness is Dalit literature" (Muktibodh 270). Here too the author is emphasizing on the literature written by Dalits. Prominent Gujarati writer Harish Mangalam in an interview said that "the literature written by writers who come from the Dalit communities has the authenticity of experience and the ring of truth" (Sherrif 69). He becomes liberal in his definition but questioned the authenticity and feel in the literature written by non-Dalit authors. Eleanor Zelliot another literary scholar quoting Dalit school says that "Those in the Dalit school would say: Yes, there is Dalit literature. Only Dalit can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes" (Zelliot). Sharankumar Limbale also agrees upon it by saying that "By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale). Omprakash Valmiki, a well known Hindi writer also questioned the same when he replied to Kashiram Singh on his argument "You don't have to be a horse to write on a horse!" He said:

Yes, you can write about the horse, his external contours, his canter and neighs but when at the end of the day the same horse, having done his share of labouring, exhausted and hungry, stands tied to a post in the stable, what can you write about how he feels or what emotions he harbours towards his master or about his inner pain. (Valmiki, Zootan: A Dalit Life, trans. A. P. Mukherjee, 2003)

However, some scholars wish to look at the Dalit writings from broader perspectives. Girishkumar Rohit in his concluding remarks over this issue said that "I would be just and rational to see the Dalit literature in a broad perspective. Otherwise, keeping the Dalit literature under limited purview will be harmful to it, at the same time narrow outlook will be a hindrance for the right studies" (G. N. Rohit 11). In a talk organised by KP Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, Shubash Sharma rejected the notion that only Dalit can write Dalit literature and said that even non-Dalit writers have been eloquently presenting the agony and exploitation of Dalits because of their empathy for the downtrodden and overall experience about society (Kumar).

If we look at the literature written by so-called non-Dalit writers we may find several masterpieces. Despite being a Brahmin, Bechen Sharma Pandey highlighted the prohibition of entry of Dalits in the temple in his book 'Badhua ki beti' back in 1928. Similarly, 'Parishisht' by Giriraj Kishor and 'Dharati Dhan na apna' by Jagdish Chandra, 'untouchable' and 'coolie' by Mulk Raj Anand also portrayed the Dalit agony. Munshi Premchand panned wonderful fiction (Rangbhoomi) and short stories (Thakur ka Kuaan; Kafan etc.) depicting the issues of exploitation, oppression, harassment, untouchability etc in Indian society.

The Novel "Nachyo Bahut Gopal" written by Amrit Lal Nagar is also realistic depicting the issues of exploitation, oppression, harassment, untouchability etc of Dalits in Indian society. These writing cannot be considered downer than Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki, Diwali by Dalpat Chauhan, Baby Kamble's 'The prison we broke', 'when I hid my caste' by Baburao Bagul and other similar notable writings. The list is not exhaustive. But, criticising their work because they did not fall into the same category will be a hindrance to the production of good literature. The work of Shakespeare cannot be criticised as he wrote on Kings and he was not the king or writing of Arvind Ghosh on slaves as he was not a slave. Mahadevi verma an famous chhayavadi hindi poet, also write "Mera Parivar" on many pets but she was a human being. If the literature is evaluated on these notions, the originality and sensitivity of the literature will be lost.

The arguments of the scholars supporting the notion that Dalit literature is literature written by only Dalits itself are questionable if we look into the broader definition of the term Dalit they have agreed upon. As per their definition of the term Dalit as stated earlier includes everyone who has gone under any kind of exploitation be it social, patriarchal, financial, racial, or on any other ground. How people one will identify that the author has not gone under any such situation. If an author writes his experience in form of fiction and is not willing to public his agony then how will one identify whether his writing should be counted as Dalit literature or not. Several scholars have criticised Premchand's writings Rangbhoomi, Thakur ka Kuaan, Kafan based on the argument that Premchand failed to portray the problem of untouchability here. In such arguments again their definition of Dalit comes under scan as it says 'oppression of any kind leads the one to be included under the term Dalit'.

As far as the argument of experience of exploitation is concerned many examples prove it wrong that personal experience of oppression is necessary to depict the pain of others. One of the great examples is Mahatma Buddha himself who became Buddha from Siddharth. He may never have experienced such exploitation or even seen or heard about it, but when he saw the pain of others, he empathised with it and left his kingdom to work for the people. Another such example is Karl Marx who belonged to an elite family in Germany and wrote a lot on class conflicts. His writings were very effective that threatened the people on the throne. Consequently, he was expelled from Paris and died as a stateless refugee in London. No country in the world was ready to give him citizenship. The effect of his writing was so huge that it became the root of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Many subjects of social sciences and literature are incomplete without reading Karl Marx. Hence, if the importance of his writings is denied just because he

belonged to an elite class would be quite unjustified. Not only Marx but most of the philosophers and scholars from the Western World belonged to elite classes and a similar situation also exists in India. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Jyotiba Fule, Ishwarchandr Vidyasagar worked against the exploitation of people in society on various grounds.

Everyone must agree that when someone reads a novel, the reader gets lost in the world of the novel which is depicted by the writer of it. He starts feeling all the emotions penned in the novel be it happiness, sadness, exploitation or anything else. Similarly in the movies, the viewer becomes angry, laughs, cries and feels other emotions just by viewing the scenes going on in the movie. His feelings are at that time remains less important. All these are based on the emotional and social quotient within a person which is the subject of individual psychology. While reading a piece of writing author is less important. It is the writing which gives fame to the author but not the author's own experiences. The art of writing and portraying on paper is same important than personal experience. This thought may apply to all literary writing.

Many upper-caste Hindu authors support the notion that only literature written by Dalits can be called Dalit literature. Here their fear is the tag Dalit perhaps they are not willing to be tagged as Dalit writers. Such an attitude will not be good for the elimination of the problems of oppression and exploitation from the society and one must avoid getting trapped by such social evils and mentality. We are living in a country where the people are supreme and those people should not be considered up or down just because of caste or financial condition. At the same time, the criticism of the literature should be based on the quality of the writing the arguments made in it and based on the aesthetics of the literature but not based on who has authored it is not justifiable. In large perspective, neither literature is Dalit nor the author. Dalit literature, feminist literature, tribal literature or any other kind of literature are part of literature and they cannot be differentiated by calling some literature mainstream literature. Every literature has its importance and it cannot be subordinated to other literary literature. Naming the literature under the different heading is just the act of classifying the literature to easily identify its content or the ground on which it is written. There cannot be different yardsticks, different canons and different aesthetics to measure the same form of literature. Therefore there should not be any question of differentiation between mainstream literature and Dalit literature.

Another issue for the Dalit literature is the issue to depict the upper class inside the Dalit communities. The class conflict is not unique to one caste but it is common for every caste and religion that exists in the world. The class in

any society which is prosperous generally wishes to lead the others in their society just because they are more educated or financially strong to them. There is nothing wrong with it as they have both educational and financial qualifications to lead others. But, the problem starts when they wish that others should not grow so that their status in society remains intact. Satyaprakash has tried to depict a similar issue in his story 'Dalit Brahman'. It is worth quoting an incident of HG Wells; when a young lady journalist reaches the house of HG Wells to take an interview, he was showing his new house to his friends. He asked the lady journalist to go with them. On the third floor, he showed a small room mentioning that this room is his bedroom. His friends asked him why he doesn't use the beautiful room on the ground floor as a bedroom. Wells said 'those rooms are for my housekeepers and my cook who are with me for the last 20 years. The friend of Wells surprised hearing this and said 'generally people give small rooms to cook and housekeepers'. HG Wells replied that 'I neither believe in this system nor it has any space in my house because I can never forget that my mother was working as a housekeeper in London'. The lady journalist was overwhelmed by the thoughts of HG Wells and then she asked all questions open-heartedly. The point to mention in this incident is to follow the path we expect from others. The classes of any society which are educationally and financially strong must feel the pain of the people who due to several reasons could not uplift their standard of living and indulge in the efforts of improvement of conditions of others. It is quite visible in the educated youth but missing from elsewhere. Dalit literature needs to portray this issue as well.

The objective of the Dalit literature is to improve the conditions of the Dalits in society and to inspire them to live together forgetting the 'caste conflicts'. Exploitation is a social evil, and a notable change in this is visible. However, it does not mean that it has been removed from the roots. There are still cases of exploitation due to caste, colour, gender and financial grounds which ought to be eradicated. Perhaps, this was the reason that Babasaheb Ambedkar burned 'Manusmriti' which is considered the root of the caste system in India. He was a supporter of equality regardless of caste, religion, colour and gender. However, in Literature more anger is due to the exploitation of centuries. Most of the writings refer to the history of social exploitation. However, today the situation has changed and the financial condition of the people is the reason for most exploitations although not all. Many Dalit writings also successfully depict this issue be it 'Godan' of Mushi Premchand or 'Bahiskrit Phulo' of Nirav Patel. Literature is to create society. It should fill the positive energy in the readers. Every literary work fulfilling its objective should be welcomed regardless of the going into religion, gender or caste of the writer.

Any Exploitation due to caste, colour, religion, gender is a social evil and it cannot be imposed completely on any particular community or caste. One may find examples from every community fighting against the social evils prevalent in the society, e.g. Raja Rammohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Buddha, Shahuji Maharaj, Pandit Rahul Sankritayan (Kedarnath Pandey etc. The United States of America is also having a history of exploitation of blacks by whites but the blacks in the USA has not only accepted but also welcomed the efforts of Franklin Roosevelt. They did not compare the efforts of Roosevelt with that of Martin Luther King.

Similarly, the peoples belonging to higher caste need to learn that the caste system in India is originated from them and it will not eliminate by removing surnames or having sympathy towards Dalits. They need to accept criticism. If anyone thinks that he is being of higher caste live together with equality with all lower castes then he should understand that he is still bounded by the caste system. To exterminate the caste system we need to destroy the caste culture injected into our behaviour. In simple words, the words spoken or written should be visible in his/her behaviour and culture.

This year we have completed 75 years of Independence and in the age of globalization and knowledge every individual need to understand that to compete with the world every single person of the society regardless of caste, colour, gender, religion, need to play his part. All communities of the society should walk together. At the same time, it is also required to evade all the pride and anger born due to caste or the events of exploitation in the past, because it is definite truth that history cannot be hanged to death.

References

Ahmad, Imtiaz. "Can there be a Category called Dalit Muslims?" 31 August 2009. 14 August 2021 <<https://dalitmuslims.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/can-there-be-a-category-called-dalit-muslims/>>.

Dangle, Arjun. "Dalit literature: past, present and future." literature, Poisoned bread : translations from modern Marathi Dalit. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. 264.

Firstpost. Short history of word 'Dalit': Move to scrap use of term has roots in history; all ruling parties have applied labels to community. 16 November 2018. 4 August 2021

<<https://www.firstpost.com/india/short-history-of-word-dalit-advisory-to-scrap-use-of-term-has-roots-in-history-ruling-party-always-tried-to-label-community-with-alternative-names-5108311.html>>.

Kumar, Madan. "'A non-dalit writer can also portray dalits' agony'." 23 December 2013. Times of India. 15 August 2021 <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/a-non-dalit-writer-can-also-portray-dalits-agony/articleshow/27761069.cms>>.

Limbale, Sharankumar. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations, Translated by Alok Mukherjee. Orient Longman: Hyderabad, 2004.

Muktibodh, Sharatchandra. "'What is dalit literature?'" Trans. Anil Raghunath Kulkarni." Dangle, Ed. Arjun. Poisoned bread: translation from modern Marathi Dalit literature. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009. 270.

Rohit, Girishkumar N. Dalit chetna kendrit Hindi-Gujarati Upanyas. Ahmedabad: Gujarat Dalit Sahitya Academy, 2004.

Rohit, Rajendra. Prarambh: samikshatmak lekho. Vadodara: Guru Design, 2012.

Rohit, Ratilal. Ambedkarvadi sahitya. Mumbai: Mumbai University, 2015.

Savyasaachi. "Dalit studies: exploring criteria for a new discipline." Economic and Political Weekly 24 April 2004: 1658-1660.

Sherrif, K. M. "'Dalit literature has never been sectarian': conversation with Harish Manglam." Indian literature 37.01 (1994): 69-77.

Valmiki, Omprakash. Zootan: A Dalit Life, trans. A. P. Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2003.

Waghela, Yashwant. "Gujarati dalit sahitya." oza, Mafat, Ratilal Nayak and Purvi Oza. Sahityik nibandhmala: lekhankaushan ane krutiparichay. Ahmedabad: Aadarsh Prakashan, 2007. 95-115.

Wessler, Heinz. "From marginalisation to rediscovery of identity: Dalit and Adivasi voices in Hindi literature." Studia Neophilologica June 2020.

Zelliot, Eleanor. "Dalit Sahitya: The Historical Background." Zelliot, ed. Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor. An Anthology of Dalit Literature. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1992. 18-19.